

Dirty Lesbian Pictures: Art and Pornography in *The L Word*<sup>1</sup>

*Rebecca Beirne*

Showtime's television drama *The L Word* (2004-) has an oft-times precarious relationship with obscenity. This is not unlike other lesbian cultural productions, which have had a history of being viewed as obscenity by the mainstream: from the *The Well of Loneliness* obscenity trial in 1928<sup>2</sup> to criminal charges being laid on a Toronto bookstore for distributing lesbian pornographic magazine *Bad Attitude* in 1992.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, within lesbian cultures, debates have raged over what constitutes obscenity and what constitutes acceptable sexuality and sexual representation, most notably during what has come to be known as the sex wars, which took place during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>4</sup> During this period, 'sex-radical' lesbians who not only argued for but also created a wealth of pornographic texts challenged lesbian feminist prohibitions against pornography. This era had a substantial effect on not only lesbian cultures, but also lesbian cultural representation, and the investments in sex and style, together with the reclamation of lesbian femininity, have arguably contributed to the mainstream's contemporary interest in lesbianism and willingness to display lesbian images in mass-cultural forums such as television.

As the contemporary lesbian text most visible to the mainstream, how does *The L Word* position itself in terms of these histories? With some feminists decrying it as soft porn, deliberately titillating a straight male audience,<sup>5</sup> and right-wingers viewing it as perversion,<sup>6</sup> *The L Word* takes quite a different attitude towards pornography than that which might be expected. Instead of a sex-radical-inspired celebratory attitude that would seem ideologically necessary to underlie the kinds of images the

series projects, *The L Word* instead seeks to posit a very clear demarcation between that which it deems to be pornography and a rather amorphous definition of 'art': a demarcation curiously reminiscent of pre-sex-wars distinctions between pornography and erotica. It also harks back to these earlier modalities in its concrete signification of pornography within a continuum of violence against women. It does this within the contemporary context of a concurrent increase in right-wing backlashes against sex in general, and homosexuality in particular, *and* a contemporary increase in the amount of homosexual sexuality depicted on television - or at the very least on cable. It is notable that *The L Word* indeed appears on cable television in its home market of the US, as cable broadcasters are generally able to represent sexualit(ies) deemed unsuitable or indeed 'pornographic' by network standards.

Creator Ilene Chaiken's most noted work previous to *The L Word* was the writing of the Golden Globe winning telemovie *Dirty Pictures* (2000) which was concerned with the story of Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Centre director Dennis Barrie's (played by James Woods) curation of a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition, and the consequent obscenity trial prompted by the mobilisation of the religious Right. The film appears to end with an archetypal Hollywood ending of the protagonist's victory over his oppressors, complete with clapping, celebratory music and a speech that the jurors in this case had acted to protect freedom of expression. The scene then, however, cuts to a representative of the religious Right in this film, who had previously attempted to bribe and intimidate Barrie and his family. Sitting languidly in a darkened room, illuminated by a single shaft of light, the character asserts that:

We didn't lose anything...all across the country these days people are much more careful about the kind of artwork they show in their museums and galleries...the First Amendment? All well and good. But someone's got to protect the good people of this country from filth and degradation, we'll never stop fighting this fight. Someone has to save the moral soul of America.

Throughout this speech, the camera zooms in, eventually ending on a sinister extreme close-up of his face. This filmic afterword acts as a warning about the unstoppable nature of right-wing forces, despite seeming legal victories.

As if in answer to this prediction, *The L Word* in its first season repeats the storyline of *Dirty Pictures*. Bette Porter (Jennifer Beals), one of the most prominent of *The L Word*'s characters, is clearly drawn from Chaiken's depiction of Barrie – Bette too works as the director of an art museum whose acronym is also the CAC (in this case the California Arts Centre), and spends the latter part of the first season embroiled in rhetorical and literal attacks on the gallery's showing of the 'Provocations' exhibition by a rightwing religious group known as the 'Coalition for Concerned Citizens,' led by Fae Buckley (Helen Shaver).

*The L Word*'s 'Provocations' exhibition however goes one step further in its 'provocation' than the Mapplethorpe exhibition, for as well as sexual and sado-masochistic images, *Provocations* includes a fictional video-recorded performance-art piece entitled 'Jesus Is In Me' by fictional artist Isabella Perna (Carmen Aguirre). This piece, initially shown as the 'random act'<sup>7</sup> which begins 'Luck, Next Time' (1:

9), depicts the fictional artist on her knees, actively being sodomised by a representation of Jesus Christ in a classically posed tableau. When the video is re-screened later in Bette's office, she comments on her interpretation of the piece: 'Look at her face – she's searching for a feeling. It's like she's longing for faith. She'd do anything to get it. To feel it.' A man (Joe MacLeod) delivering flowers then asks if the piece is 'supposed to be art', and in response to Bette's affirmative answer, comments that, 'I guess Hustler and Penthouse may put out some pretty good art too.' The muffled laughter of James (Preston Cook), Bette's secretary, affirms that this is indeed a plausible interpretation, though the next shot of the piece, which shows a shot of the artist crouched, still rocking, and crying, holding her face in her hands, underlines the complexity of the image beyond that which would arguably be expected in pornographic forums.

Tavia Nyong'o asserts that, 'The oppositional irony of this piece...divides its audience into those who experience it as sacrilege and those, like Bette, who are thrown by it into aesthetic rapture.'<sup>8</sup> To limit the piece to merely a divisive 'provocation' intended to split its audience does not, however, truly capture the complexity of this artwork and its inclusion in the series. For 'Jesus Is In Me' is suggestive of various interpretations: it could be a literalist interpretation of the sublimated sexual imagery often present in religious discourse and art, punning on the oft repeated phrase 'Jesus is in me', with Perna's crying thereafter highlighting the juxtaposition of such imagery with religious guilt over sex. Perna's deployment of the *image* of Christ for her own ends in this artwork can also be metaphorically read, in the context of this storyline in *The L Word* and its critique of American religious right-wing groups, as an accusation that groups like Fae Buckley's also utilise the

image and words of Christ for their own purposes. This interpretation is further suggested by Fae's distortion of Bette's words in a video made and broadcast by her group, which both renders the audience disinclined to be sympathetic to her cause, and is further suggestive of misinterpretation and reconstitution of *language*, plausibly including that found in the bible, for the achievement of one's own political ends.

While 'Luck, Next Time' leaves the question of what is art and what is pornography open through conversations such as that between Bette and the delivery-man while still calling upon the viewer to empathise with those who believe in freedom of expression, the next episode, 'Liberally' (1: 10), takes a clear position on the differentials between art and pornography. The 'random act' that opens this episode is a segment from the shooting of a pornographic film, featuring two teenage 'schoolgirls' engaging in 'lesbian' activity, before one of them is called upon to give oral sex to their male 'principal'. It is later discovered that this young actress is Cora Buckley (Michaela Mann), Fae's daughter, who ran away from home after her mother 'couldn't, or wouldn't' stop her father from 'abusing the hell out of' her. It is also revealed that Fae had paid off a judge to 'expunge the record'. This storyline both acts to establish Fae Buckley as a morally reprehensible character and to demonstrate her moralistic concern 'for the children' to be dubious. It further also rhetorically resituates paedophilia, a main argument by the religious Right against gay parenting, into the Christian, heterosexual nuclear family, a family form that such groups as the Coalition for Concerned Citizens seek to establish as the only possible form of family.

The juxtaposition of Perna's artwork and Cora's participation in, and positioning by, the pornographic video delineates a clear distinction between the two, further encouraging the viewer to inculcate such a division, and clearly separate what it defines to be, as Bette puts it 'complex, provocative art' (1:10) and morally reprehensible 'pornography', that, the series implies, damages children. With this latter contention, *The L Word* deploys the archetypically right-wing rhetorical technique of appealing to a model of children as essential innocents who are 'damaged' by the presence of sexuality in society. It also fails to acknowledge that the line between 'complex, provocative art' and pornography is not fixed, and cannot be determined without considering the impact of both context and the spectator. The possibility for the very same material to be viewed in vastly differential ways by different spectatorships was indeed clearly seen in the very controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs that this storyline is based on.

'Luck, Next Time' and 'Liberally' are clearly structurally linked by both their opening and closing segments, and these linkages serve to highlight their shared thematic concerns and strengthen the argument about art and pornography that these episodes engage in. It is significant that the endings of each of these episodes are overlaid with a religiously themed song (Nick Cave's 'Into My Arms' and the Rufus Wainwright cover of Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' respectively), whose lyrics inflect and affect the audience's response. 'Into My Arms' plays shortly after Bette has learned of her wife Tina Kennard's (played by Laurel Holloman) miscarriage, and immediately following her attempt to comfort her in a darkened house where she is confronted by members of the Coalition for Concerned Citizens (including the flower delivery man), who are hammering a sign into her lawn and hurling various epithets at

Bette, including telling her that she is 'going to hell' (1: 9). The song then starts with the words, 'I don't believe in an interventionist God,' and continues as Bette enters the house, rests her head against the illuminated window with arms spread and hands resting on the door frame, silently sobbing, with her framing and posture suggestive of crucifixion. She then straightens up and composes herself, walking off towards Tina, and directly into the camera (and thus figuratively into the audience) to the words 'direct you into my arms'. Despite any feelings the audience may have towards the potentially pornographic nature of the exhibition itself, here the viewer is called upon to empathise with Bette, and thereby if not disagree with the perspective of the CCC, at least censure their methods.

'Liberally' ends with 'Hallelujah' playing over the intercutting of Bette's tears in the aftermath of her debate with Fae Buckley, scenes of Cora in the previous video and new scenes of a blank-eyed Cora soliciting by the side of the road. Fae's assertion to Bette during a television debate, 'The Bible condemns homosexuality. That's why God took your unborn child from your lesbian lover...and that was a blessing...So that he doesn't have to suffer the degradation he would have been subject to had he been born into your depraved life', leads Bette to call her a monster, and start crying. The cut to Cora, in a both literally and metaphorically 'dark place', evoke Fae's calls upon Bette to feel shame for 'making this world a darker place for your child to live in', presenting the real dark world created for Fae's daughter by her mother's desire to project and maintain a certain (and false) public image. While Nyong'o feels Bette's tears in this scene are symptomatic of a 'cultural logic of victimization, which constructs the show as a theatre of resentment where strength cannot appear except in the hands of a villain like right-wing doyenne Faye Buckley,'<sup>9</sup> I feel that this

‘strength’ is portrayed as dubious and the scenes of Bette crying, together with the scenes of Cora, while they indeed portray victimisation, are rhetorically effective in signifying the effects and costs of the triumphs of the religious Right, and, with the repeated proclamation of ‘Hallelujah’, question what is really being celebrated in the victories of such pieces of ‘God’s work’ that fundamentalist Christians like Fae engage in.

The explicit discussion of the demarcation between art and pornography in such storylines as the Provocations exhibit in *The L Word* is of further interest in light of claims that *The L Word* itself functions as a pornographic spectacle. Perhaps the most curious example thereof occurred almost exactly 15-years after, and in the same state as, the opening of the Mapplethorpe exhibition portrayed in *Dirty Pictures*, when a police officer working as a school resource officer, was placed on ‘administrative leave’, and possibly fired, for having a *The L Word* screensaver. Although the still photographs utilised in the screensaver ‘may be far from scandalous ... School officials in Camden, Ohio, say it’s not a problem to have still photographs on a screen saver, but if the photographs advertise a lesbian-oriented TV show, the situation gets complicated’ as children may thereby be exposed to ‘adult issues’.<sup>10</sup> It is not that the images themselves are being argued as pornographic, but rather the promotional photographs of actresses *playing* lesbians, together with the potentially quite obscure title, are themselves deemed extremely unsuitable for the eyes of children, rendering the very *idea* of lesbianism pornographic, or at least fitting the ‘adult’ category.

*The L Word* has also been critiqued as a pornographic spectacle from quite a different quarter: as ‘soft porn’ that is ‘appealing to straight men’<sup>11</sup> or as Winnie McCroy put



it, 'pud fodder for Joe Sixpack'.<sup>12</sup> Though others comment that while 'there is certainly enough lesbian action on the show to offend the straitlaced... there is hardly enough to satiate aficionados of dyke porn,'<sup>13</sup> considering the potential for heterosexual male voyeurism and appropriation of *The L Word*, and particularly in light of *Chaiken* and Showtime's apparent willingness to market the programme to heterosexual male viewers, one can certainly understand Constance Reeder and McCroy's concerns.<sup>14</sup> In the second season of the series, a storyline emerges that appears to act as a response to such critiques.

The introduction of the characters Mark Wayland (Eric Lively) and Gomey (Sam Easton) acts to make intradiegetic the straight male voyeur that such critiques situate in *The L Word's* perceived audience.<sup>15</sup> A direct-to-video maker whose filmography includes such notables as *Wild-Ass Catholic School Girls*, Mark appeals to the women's knowing 'what it's like to try to figure out how to be an artist' (as well as their financial needs), and tells them that all he really 'has ever wanted to do' is 'make documentaries' in order to gain a position as their housemate ('Lynch Pin', 2: 4). We soon discover that the subjects of his first documentary are to be Shane McCutcheon (Katherine Moennig) and Jenny Schecter (Mia Kirshner): and as well as barely consensual interview footage, Mark places secret video cameras throughout the house, for the next six episodes proceeding to film every moment of their lives, and at times orchestrating scenarios to make the plot of this 'documentary' more interesting.<sup>16</sup>

Such a storyline raises the question of the relationship of television to voyeurism, particularly in light of the popularity of reality television. Emanating from a drama series, a television genre which has certainly lost ground to reality television due to

both the latter's popularity and potentially lower production costs, the inclusion of this storyline can be seen as an embittered and (somewhat) hyperbolic representation of reality television. Nonetheless, a society that spends its leisure hours voyeuristically watching other people, whether they be wandering around a house or participating in scenarios designed to create narrative tension, is surely a society that is incrementally becoming inoculated against perceiving voyeurism as something negative. This can perhaps most clearly be seen in the transformation of George Orwell's sinister vision of the ever-watching 'Big Brother' in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*<sup>17</sup> (originally published in 1949) to a disciplinary yet sympathetic character the audience is encouraged to identify with in a globalised mass-television broadcast.

Initially, the presence of Mark in *The L Word* as a voyeuristic villain appeared to be a narratively sinister critique of male objectification of women, and lesbians in particular. This thematic criticism seems particularly surprising given that *The L Word* has - in its interviews, advertising, and throughout its various pedagogic apologist moments within character dialogues, attempted to court straight male viewers. Through this storyline, the series once again sets out to clearly demarcate the boundaries of 'pornography' and 'objectification' that will allow the series to remain outside these boundaries. Thus, *The L Word*, a product whose very existence appears to be dependent upon the freeing up of presenting sexualised images of lesbians by the proponents of lesbian pornography during the sex wars, interestingly appears to position itself with their (middle ground) opponents - those activists who sought to maintain clear distinctions between 'erotica' and 'pornography' (see for example Gloria Steinem's 'Erotica vs. Pornography')<sup>18</sup> rather than with those who

wished to reclaim pornographic images. At the same time, *The L Word* goes beyond what earlier female producers of both lesbian erotica *and* pornography (who sought same-sex desirous women as their audience) would perhaps have deemed appropriate by explicitly marketing it to a heterosexual (and particularly heterosexual male) audience.

It soon becomes apparent that Mark's presence in the narrative appears to be intended to provide an identificatory viewing position for the presumed straight male viewers of the series. Sitting conversing with Jenny during his first episode, Mark takes a peek at Shane, Alice Pieszecki (Leisha Hailey) and others in the pool through the same fence utilised by Jenny in the pilot to watch Shane and an unnamed woman having sex unseen, which marked the beginning of Jenny's exploration of her sexuality. Prefiguring that Mark too, like Jenny, will become fascinated and engrossed by these women in a more than sexual-voyeuristic manner. The contrast drawn between Mark and his friend Gomey, whose interest in Mark's new housemates is depicted as more prurient and needs to be reined in, is furthered throughout the course of this storyline: perhaps most clearly presented when Mark zooms into Shane's face during a video-taped sex encounter as he 'just... I wanna know what she's feeling,' to the protests of Gomey who asks 'who gives a fuck what she's *feeling*?' ('Lagrimas de Oro', 2: 6). This somewhat dubious distinction between sexual and emotional voyeurism positions Mark as a narratively more positive and redeemable character than the two-dimensional Gomey. Mark's attempts to capture the essence of Shane's magnetism, and discover the roots of her dissociative melancholy, form a kind of worship, suggestive of his documentary being indeed the 'art', albeit exploitative, that he intends it to be, rather than the simple pornography that Gomey and their funding

producer demand. The correlation between Mark's work and that of the producers of *The L Word* is also suggested by the frequent inter-cutting of images throughout these episodes between the usual clear glossy images, and Mark's grainy footage, the latter frequently accompanied by shots of him watching the drama unfold. Obviously, this highlights the constructed nature of these very images seen in *The L Word*, and the potential for exploitation and objectification that they hold.

Perhaps the compromises the producers of *The L Word* deemed necessary in order to gain funding for the series, are expressed through Mark's interactions with his funding producer, and the absolution of Mark in the name of 'art', and desire to seek emotional truth, is a form of self-explanation for providing the 'pud fodder for Joe Sixpack' that McCroy writes of, while simultaneously allowing the producers to distance themselves from the more prurient aspects thereof. Mark, or the producers of *The L Word*, it is insinuated, may be filming the sex, but their wish is to get to the emotional truth of the matter – and they have to show the sex in order not only to do so, but to acquire the funding to show people the interior realities of a group of lesbians and thereby make them relate empathically to lesbian lives. This is in clear contrast to lesbian pornographers who see representing lesbian sex itself to lesbians as a positive, reclamatory act, rather than as an unfortunate but necessary compromise. In an interview in the *New York Times* Alison Glock recounts Chaiken's belief that, "Just telling these stories is in itself a radical act," she said. And if Showtime expects her to tweak and repackage and make lesbianism hot, hot, hot then she is happy to comply.'<sup>19</sup> Whether one is to label this attitude as 'pragmatic or opportunist' as Eve Sedgwick puts it,<sup>20</sup> it is clear that some parallels can be drawn between Mark and the producers of *The L Word* in this respect, which is perhaps why Mark is drawn in a

somewhat sympathetic light. This storyline thereby places both parties in clear juxtaposition to those that *The L Word* unequivocally labels ‘pornographers’.

However, despite the redemptive qualities ascribed to him, Mark’s actions are still seen as having a concrete effect of harm at least on Jenny (though it arguably assists Shane to find happiness with Carmen de la Pica Morales [Sarah Shahi]). Jenny’s knowledge of the filming appears to trigger a downward spiral that culminates in the surfacing of her repressed memory of being raped as a child, which had been subtly suggested in her writing all season. Jenny makes clear in several forceful speeches to Mark the extent of the violation that his cameras have enacted. The ‘art’ defence the series appears to have given Mark is seen in his own defence of himself when he begs Jenny to ‘watch my documentary. You know me. You’ll understand. It’s not what you think it is. I know that I crossed the line. I know that I went too far with this’ (‘Land Ahoy’, 2.10). This request is made in spite of Jenny having just told him, ‘Don’t you dare tell me this is for the sake of art.’ Jenny responds to Mark’s request by asking him if he has sisters, exhorting him: ‘To ask your sisters about the very first time that they were intruded upon by some man, or a boy. ... Because there isn’t a single girl or woman in this world that hasn’t been intruded upon and sometimes it’s relatively benign, and sometimes it’s *so* fucking painful’. Violation is herein not excused in the name of art, and the production of this kind of surveilled pornography is placed in *The L Word* upon a continuum of sexual violence, seen in the reference to Mark’s ‘rapey cameras’.

However, despite this and various other speeches which consider Mark and his actions unforgivable, he not only remains in the series for the rest of the season, but

despite his actions, a certain degree of narrative and audience sympathy for him builds up over the course of his arc; and by the final episode his penitence seems to have been rewarded by his being offered an opportunity to narratively ‘go legit’ as a filmmaker by filming a speech by Gloria Steinem. How Ms Steinem, a key figure in the discourse against pornography and female objectification, might feel about such a person filming her is not discussed. His remaining in the series is the result of Jenny’s daring him to ‘stay here and deal with this’, specifying that ‘we’re not friends’ (‘Loud & Proud’, 2: 11). This acts as a potential dare to the heterosexual male viewer consuming the series voyeuristically, to not be shamed into stopping watching the show as a result of this storyline, but learn to watch it in a different way, and atone for his voyeurism, via the feminist consciousness implied by Mark’s taping of Steinem.<sup>21</sup>

The ambiguous attitudes the series presents towards deliberate pornographic display and another key subject of debate during the sex wars, sadomasochism, are then realised during the aftermath of the Mark storyline. Jenny, still reeling from Mark’s invasion, visits an S/M dungeon known as ‘The Seven Stations of the Cross’ (2.11). We have earlier seen Dana Fairbanks (Erin Daniels) and Alice, who were at the time engaging in sexual experimentation with strap-ons and gendered role play, enter the venue in curiosity, and leave immediately, somewhat frightened. Jenny later ventures there after another confrontation with Mark, less in the name of sexual experimentation than in the enactment of a kind of grief.<sup>22</sup> Immediately after being tied to the cross, she fully recovers her submerged memory and the audience finally discovers what happened to Jenny, and how her present self still inhabits this originary scene of violation. Her almost-engagement in masochism has been

successful in regaining a memory that she has attempted previously, by storytelling and a makeshift prayer-ritual, to recover, so that it will not continue to haunt her. In contrast to these devices, the cross works because, it is suggested by *The L Word*, a masochistic act is a subconscious re-enactment of her trauma, as seen when she looks frightened, disassociative and cries upon being tied down.

Through an arrangement with the dominatrix in 'L'Chaim' (2: 12) Jenny begins to work at a very seedy strip bar, asserting that her choice to do so is motivated by a desire to control her objectification:

Because, when I'm in there, it's my fucking choice when I take off my top and I wanna show my breasts. And it's my fucking choice when I take off my pants and I show my pussy, and then I stop when I wanna stop and it makes me feel good because I'm in charge, and it helps me remember all this childhood shit that happened to me. You know, like, I have to. It's important ('Lacuna', 2: 13).

The earlier part of this statement is reminiscent of lesbian stripper and co-founder of lesbian pornographic magazine *On Our Backs* Debi Sundahl's assertion that, 'Women who work in the sex industry are not responsible for, nor do they in any way perpetuate, the sexual oppression of women. In fact, to any enlightened observer, our very existence provides a distinction and a choice as to when a woman should be treated like a sex object and when she should not be. At the theatre, yes; on the street, no.'<sup>23</sup> While Sundahl's and – it would initially appear here – Jenny's declarations act

as a reclamation of stripping as at least not harmful, if not potentially empowering, in Jenny's case this activity is juxtaposed with a scene later in 'Lacuna' where she is discovered by Shane on the floor, crying and covered in blood as the result of numerous acts of self-injury. This self-harm, coupled with Jenny's memories which form the genesis of both of these activities, is suggestive of her stripping being less a controlled 'choice' than a form of masochism, which is represented as analogous to self-harming behaviour. David L. Calof argues that 'self injury expresses unresolved trauma and disowned affect', and can be used to 're-enact previous abuse as a way of feeling a sense of control that was not present during the original abuse',<sup>24</sup> an understanding that is consistent with Jenny's stripping activities as well as with her cutting. *The L Word* thereby presents masochism as being performed by those not of sound mind; sexual exhibitionists as necessarily victims; and all these quite different acts within a kind of continuum of violence against women that includes rape and incest.<sup>25</sup>

Upon close examination of *The L Word* it does not appear to have the celebratory or even accepting attitude towards pornography that would perhaps be expected from such a mainstream, post-sex wars product which is clearly willing to present and market itself as a form of televisual soft porn. Instead, a clear distinction is postulated between 'art' and 'pornography' reminiscent of Steinem's distinctions between erotica and pornography, with the former being understood as 'freely chosen, mutual sexuality' while the latter is seen as existing within a continuum of violence against women.<sup>26</sup> This dichotomy in *The L Word* at times appears to be rather amorphous and self-serving – pornography is situated as anything *outside* that which the characters or metaphorically the producers of *The L Word* engage in, while the most



violating practice depicted, Mark's surveillance, is to a degree deemed 'art' through its focus on the emotional state of the characters and metaphoric linking to the producers of the series (although their non-consensual nature is chastised). The constant counter-posing of these distinctions allows *The L Word* to simultaneously condemn those who would seek to censor potentially pornographic art, and perform a narrative condemnation of pornography. Although in each of these circumstances the pornography depicted is made by and intended for straight males, the lack of reference to the genre of lesbian-authored and intended pornography makes it difficult to ascertain *The L Word's* attitudes towards the latter type of pornography.

The presence of Steinem as a special guest star in 'Lacuna' (2.13) functions perhaps as a gesture from a rather post-feminist series to the presence of feminism in lesbian history, and an assertion of the continued need for feminist activism in contemporary society. Unfortunately, the scene in which *The L Word* characters converse with Steinem is rather trite and suffers from poor dialogue, which diminishes the scene's ability to clearly signify anything to the audience. All that is really established via this conversation is a rather preachy message that there are feminists who are not lesbians; lesbians who are not feminists; that straight women are bigger 'man-haters' than lesbians; and that some are 'predisposed' – to *what* exactly it is not immediately clear due to the scripting, but it seems that this conversation refers to being predisposed to (any) particular sexuality - while some have a choice regarding which gender they are attracted to. Steinem then reappears to give a speech that acts as a liberal-feminist call to action. The inclusion within *The L Word* of such a call in some respects acts to cycle it back to an earlier understanding of what would be included in a lesbian text. This is in keeping with the series' constant attempts to locate a

distinction between art and pornography, a position that is somewhat baffling in light of the kinds of images and politics that *The L Word* deploys and represents.

---

<sup>1</sup> Since the writing of this article, several papers have been published that discuss similar issues, albeit from different perspectives and with different foci. These include Margaret McFadden's "'We cannot afford to keep being so high-minded': Fighting the Religious Right on *The L Word*" (in James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner, eds, *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television: Essays on Recent Programming*, McFarland, 2006, 113-129), Dana Heller's 'How Does a Lesbian Look? Stendhal's Syndrome and *The L Word*' (55-68) and Merri Lisa Johnson's 'L is for 'long term': Compulsory Monogamy on *The L Word*' (115-137; both in Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, eds, *Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Television*, I.B. Tauris, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See Laura Doan, 'The Mythic Moral Panic: Radclyffe Hall and the New Genealogy,' in Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*, Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 1-30.

<sup>3</sup> Discussed by Brenda Cossman, Shannon Bell, Lisa Gotell and Becki L. Ross in *Bad Attitude/s on Trial: Pornography, Feminism and the Butler Decision*, University of Toronto Press, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> See Emma Healey, *Lesbian Sex Wars*, Virago, 1996; and Tamsin Wilton, *Finger-Licking Good: The Ins and Outs of Lesbian Sex*, Cassell, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> For example Winnie McCroy in "'L" is for Invisible,' *New York Blade*, 31 October 2003: [http://www.thelwordonline.com/L\\_is\\_for.shtml](http://www.thelwordonline.com/L_is_for.shtml); and Constance Reeder, 'The Skinny on the L Word,' *Off Our Backs* 34: 1-2, 2004, 51-52.

<sup>6</sup> See for example William F. Jasper's 'Subversion through Perversion,' *The New American*, 21:6, 2005, 20-21.

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of the very first episode, each episode of *The L Word* begins with a 'random act' that later becomes linked to the narrative in either a direct or obscure way. The term 'random act' for these scenes has become commonplace in fan discussion of *The L Word*.

<sup>8</sup> Tavia Nyong'o, 'Queer TV: A Comment,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 11:1, 2005, 104.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>10</sup> 'Sexy Screensaver Lands Police Officer in Hot Water,' *ChannelCincinnati.com*, 16 March 2005: <http://www.channelcincinnati.com/news/4291756/detail.html>

<sup>11</sup> Reeder, 'The Skinny on the L Word,' 52.

<sup>12</sup> McCroy, "'L" is for Invisible'.

<sup>13</sup> Nyong'o, 'Queer TV,' 104.

<sup>14</sup> 'In the demographic calculus that lay behind the decision to underwrite the series, Gary Levine, Showtime's vice-president for original programming, told the *New York Daily Times* its potential appeal to non-lesbian viewers rested on the understanding that "lesbian sex, girl-on-girl, is a whole cottage industry for heterosexual men".' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The L Word: Novelty in Normalcy,' *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 January 2004, B10. This article has since been reprinted as the foreword to McCabe and Akass' collection *Reading the L Word*, xix-xxiv.

<sup>15</sup> Rumours have circulated on the Internet that these characters were introduced due to Showtime's insistence that the writers include a straight male character in the second season.

<sup>16</sup> These include unsuccessfully encouraging Shane, Jenny and Carmen to have a threesome (2: 6) and hiring a 'delivery woman' to have sex with Shane (2: 5).

<sup>17</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Gloria Steinem, 'Erotica vs. Pornography (1977/78),' in Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, Henry Holt and Company, 1995, pp.238-251.

<sup>19</sup> Alison Glock, 'She Likes to Watch,' *New York Times*, 6 February 2005, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Sedgwick, 'The L Word,' B10.

<sup>21</sup> The insertion of such a perspective mirrors that of 'Scott Seomin, the entertainment media director of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, [who] sees the porn connection as a smart crossover move. "If they pull them in and get them hooked on the titillation factor," he told the *Daily News*, "that straight male is going to learn about the lives of lesbians"' Sedgwick, 'The L Word,' B10.

<sup>22</sup> The only other suggestion of some sort of sadomasochism in the series is when, after the first time Dana and Alice have sex, Alice gets stuck in a pair of handcuffs, which they must then hide from

---

Tonya (Meredith McGeachie), Dana's fiancée. Although this is played up for its comedic value, it is still portrayed as transgressive through its usage during an act of adultery.

23 Debi Sundahl, 'Stripper,' in Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander, eds, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, Cleis Press, 1987, p.176.

24 Kitty Vivekananda, 'Integrating Models for Understanding Self-injury,' *Psychotherapy in Australia* 7:1, 2000, 21-22.

25 Strip shows appear at two other times during the season. In 'Lap Dance' (2: 2) Alice, Dana and Shane take Tina to a much classier strip bar in order to attempt, unsuccessfully, to cheer her up after her break-up with Bette, while in 'Labyrinth' (2: 5) we see Dana's mother (Susan Hogan) (whom we know to be deeply repressing her same-sex desires), after some initial discomfort, rather keenly enjoying a lap dance at Dana and Tonya's bachelorette party.

26 Steinem, 'Erotica vs. Pornography,' p.240.